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CURT MCDOWELL

A filmmaker from Indiana. Those are the fixed points of Curt McDowell's persona that invariably come up in conversation. After that he gets a little hard to pin down.

McDowell disdains limits. It doesn't make any difference whether the limits pertain to the explicitly sexual subject matter explored in his films or whether they relate to the idiosyncratic structure he's employed in his more recent works. He simply refuses to acknowledge conventional constraints.

Consider the story line of one of his most popular works, THUNDERCRACK (1975), which has become a staple on the midnight movie circuit along with ROCKY HORROR PICTURE SHOW and ERASERHEAD: A group of strangers — four men, three women and a love-crazed gorilla — seek refuge from a stormy night in a haunted house. Before the evening is over, almost every conceivable sexual combination has been attempted — heterosexual, homosexual, group grope and solo sex (with the aid of a huge ripe cucumber and inflatable rubber doll). Even the gorilla and his trainer have a tryst.

A reviewer for the London GAY NEWS (which bills itself as "The World's Largest Circulation Newspaper for Homosexuals") wrote that "THUNDERCRACK is the hardest of hardcore pictures — the most sexually explicit movie I've ever viewed in Britain." But in the same review, the London critic said, "THUNDERCRACK is the funniest film I've seen in years. I literally fell from my seat at one point. It's a film of raw imaginative power and originality."

Other critics have shared that reviewer's admiration for McDowell's work. The VILLAGE VOICE said THUNDERCRACK is "a laugh a minute." The LOS ANGELES HERALD EXAMINER said, "Anyone who thinks the 'avant-garde' is synonymous with grimness, tedium and obscurity hasn't seen the films of Curt McDowell." His films have won numerous awards at film festivals throughout the U.S. — at the Ann Arbor, Yale and Foothill festivals among others. McDowell had a one-man show at the prestigious Museum of Modern Art in New York City, and one of his films, WIENERS AND BUNS MUSICAL (1971) was purchased by the Chicago Art Institute.

McDowell's acceptance in artistic circles comes as no surprise to many who knew him as a student at the San Francisco Art Institute where McDowell enrolled in 1966 on a painter's scholarship. While there he met and was greatly influenced by teacher-filmaker George Kuchar who later worked as a scriptwriter and leading actor of several McDowell films. In the 12 years since his first 16-mm film, A VISIT TO INDIANA, he's managed to produce, direct, score and act in over 30 films.

There's some indication that McDowell's works may gain a much wider audience in the future, as evidenced by the feature article on him earlier this year in the SAN FRANCISCO CHRONICLE. Some even predict McDowell will achieve the sort of public acceptance of ERASERHEAD'S director, David Lynch, who received an Academy Award nomination last year for ELEPHANT MAN.

McDowell's appearance — short, blond, fleshy — is analogous to English weather: shifting, transilient. It seems to change with the storm at whose center he usually finds himself. His films document this mutability. In one, BOGGY DEPOT, he appears paunchy and bearded, dressed in heavy sweaters like some post-war Parisian rail worker whose idea of amusement goes considerably beyond the pale. In another, FLY ME TO THE MOON, he looks like an underfed data-entry operator with delusions of grandeur. I've seen him in at least a dozen films and I've never seen the same McDowell in any two of them.

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All his early films were light-hearted entertainments; farcical amusements that in no way presaged the sea-change in direction that McDowell's films would take. His subject matter has evolved from the prosaic boy/girl/boy romps of the early films (WEINERS AND BUNS) to probing psychodramatics of the husband/wife/daughter warfare, such as that waged by TABOO's Fuqua family — a family that seems to have more in common with Poe's Ushers that with Indiana's McDowells.

Yet Curt claims that his latest film is about the McDowells: about the interior life of his family that dared not express itself openly but could be deciphered through the reverberations that were emitted. It is the question of his own sexual identity and its origin that he addresses and hopes to resolve in TABOO and in two as-yet-uncompleted films that form the remainder of a trilogy — INITIATION ON KING STREET and SPARKLE'S TAVERN.

Shortly after the Canyon Cinemateque premiered TABOO, McDowell agreed to be interviewed. The setting for the the week's worth of afternoon sessions was McDowell's Mission District flat. Throughout, the Indiana-born director fortified himself with numerous bowls of cornflakes.

ARTBEAT: You've won numerous awards for your films and yet the general public remains for the most part ignorant of your work. Are you sometimes tempted to make a film which would be more palatable to the general movie-going public?

McDowell: If you mean like John Waters did with POLYESTER, no. Although it might make you popular with the mass public, the mass public is so fad-oriented that they'll just take you in for five minutes of their life and make you a hero and then when they tire of you they'll just kick the bottom of the pedestal until you fall flat on you face.

I've been lucky in that nothing that I've ever made was so popular that I had to live up to it. THUNDERCRACK almost did that to me but thank god it was a real slow success.

Did you expect THUNDERCRACK to be a success when you were making it?

The whole film was a shock to me. Mark Eillinger and I just wanted to make a hardcore film fulfilling our fantasies, and hopefully make some money since we'd made one hardcore film before called LUNCH that did make some money. But I wanted to make one that I was proud of because I wasn't of the other one. I hoped nobody would ever see it again.

But George Kuchar threw an artistic wrench into the works. He wrote such an elaborate screenplay, using a florid Tennessee Williams style, delving into the psycho-drama of the past, with elaborate flashbacks for each character. Once we got George's script, we knew there'd be no way the raincoat crowd would go for it.

I tried to take all these improbable situations that George gave me in the script and make them believable. I mean circus animals and all that, that's a little out of my realm. The whole film was a little intimidating because it was such a big project — 192 pages of script, very complex renderings of every character. The original print was over two-and-a-half hours long. It was really an important experience for me and one that extended me quite a bit artistically. Maybe that's why I waited five years before releasing another film.

Alfred Hitchcock claimed that the actual process of filmmaking was an enervating process because he had shot the film in his head before actually climbing behind the camera. How much do you adhere to the shooting script and how much is improvised on the spot?

Hitchcock is my direct opposite in terms of approach. He creates his films as if he's a novelist writing in pictures. He'll also draw pictures of all the scenes before shooting. He's like a graphic artist who wants to see his graphic art in motion.

He also chooses actors whose personalities won't intrude on his filmic vision, and then he manipulates them to be whatever his dream was beforehand. That's because he worked within the studio system where he could just pick handfuls of cast and put them in his story. If he had to wait five years to do that story, he could just pick another cast and put them in there and it would be just as good.

But what I always thought was my forte was taking people who have something going for them personally. The interplay between my talent and theirs is always bigger than imposing my talent on someone and forcing them to be something I'd planned on ahead of time. So, I feel like what I've always liked to do, especially since I work with a lot of non-actors, is find out what it is that they feel the best doing, or have always fantasized doing, or what I think their abilities would best lend themselves to. I've never said, "Send me over ten cowboys. I need them to fill up this room."

I love the fact that I can't understand my films when I first make them. It feels like I'm making them out of a real raw place.

Do you mean drawn largely from the subconscious?

I think that's sort of what I'm doing. I just feel really good about that approach. I'm sort of stealing an idea that I got from a combination of two other artists, Henry Miller and Picasso. I have two books about their work

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sitting next to the toilet, and every time I go there I'll open to a different page.

(McDowell then gets his copy of Henry Miller's MY LIFE AND TIMES and reads aloud the following passage:)

"The tragedy of the film has been that it derives mostly from literature. This is what crippled the film... I would say, 'Throw away the script. Don't have a script.' I would say to the actors, directors, and cameramen together, 'Give them a rough idea of what's to happen and then begin to work, to improvise, to build the story as you go along, if there must be a story.' Of course, there doesn't have to be a story... The film can be greater when it has perfect freedom, when it permits fantasy, reverie, dreams to enter and all manner of disconnected things. There doesn't always have to be a reason for things to happen..."

When I came across that I was so relieved because I already had so many elements in TABOO for dealing with my family from every angle. I couldn't figure out how to put them together without worrying about the structure.

Then I pulled out the Picasso book and saw that he's got faces of faces. He has the same exact models done for pages. But each one is a totally different rendering of the same three people—one playing the flute, one with a sheep around his neck and a boola dancer. As you turn the pages you see the tons of possibilities of this combination of people, and what it could mean. He doesn't say, "And here's the answer," or "Answer is on page 62." It's just put out there for you to look at and gather your own conclusions. To see life the way he's seeing it, that there's no answer, there's no solution.

How does this relate to filmmaking?

All Hollywood films are aiming for a certain type of shape: the dramatic structure of beginning, climax and denouement, and proof that whatever it is you've set up has a certain ending. But what I want to do is a hundred preludes. I want to do preludes where I say, "Think of this and watch what happens here. OK, now you take it from there. Now, start again, what about this? Look at it from this side." It seems like cubism provided an answer to my stucture problems because that's the way I like to work.

It's fair to say, then, that you don't have a high regard for Hollywood's style of filmmaking?

We haven't really come all that far since THE GREAT TRAIN ROBBERY unless you consider BUTCH CASSIDY AND THE SUNDANCE KID a measure of growth. Film's birth and infancy was such an important innovation and discovery, and there are still people alive today who were active in the cinema of those early days. But I don't feel that the magic will be able to take hold again until those dinosaurs are absolutely dead, and I don't believe that it's going to take place in Hollywood.

So you see decentralization of Hollywood's power as the next step in the evolution of film?

Definitely. I don't believe Hollywood has a monopoly on the use of a camera as an artistic tool. It does have a monopoly on theaters and money seemingly. But what artist would want to go the route of a monopoly when they could go another route? Nobody's ever been able to top INTOLERANCE. Hollywood hasn't surpassed that, they haven't. Only a few departments have really become incredible and that's mostly in special effects, which I give them a lot of credit for. But they're still using special effects in the most traditional way, the same production-line format.

So then, is working without a dramatic stucture, like one Hollywood imposes, an ideal you try to employ in your work?

I try, but it doesn't always work. As much as I value that kind of direct spontaneous creativity, I also want to know what it's going to look like in the end. I have to have a goal, but at least I'm not rigid. I don't mind changing my goal as it goes along because it's too much fun to explore and unravel.

I thought if Picasso and Henry Miller both feel strongly that you can take elements that all relate to the same feelings you've got going inside you and it's something you want to let out, you sort of let the magic take over and — out comes TABOO.

Are you saying the magic took over in TABOO and that it expresses what you were trying to say?

I still to this day don't know what TABOO says. I haven't read about it yet, and reading the reviews seem to be the final chapter for me. I love to have my pictures turned into words. I love to have someone just say what they think happened.

When you make a film, you're not dealing with just what's in the rectangle or what's in the shot. You remember dealing with the emotions of all the people you worked with, the type of weather the day you shot, all the things that you mask from the audience. So when you see the film again, it's an experience that only you are having. The audience is having some other experience altogether.

Does it disturb you that only an incomplete experience is transmitted to the audience?

Sure, because you want to make your dreams come true. You want to isolate the experience to only that

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which is contained within the rectangle. But you know all the other things that were going on, so you don't get the thrill that an audience might or might not get from seeing just what you've chosen. For instance, I put the cloth on the lens and filter down bodies so that they look real shiny and lumnious and beautiful so the audience gets to sit down in the theater and absorb these bodies as their own fantasies if they choose to. But the only thing that will allow me a similar experience is the passing of lots of time, enough time to forget all the negative aspects and the realities that I was subject to when the film was made.

Is your collaborative approach to filmmaking an attempt to create an alternative family?

Yes. One thing I learned from George Kuchar, who's been making films with his brother since they were teenagers, was how wonderful and social films can be. It didn't have to be a nervewracking and arduous exercise. If you think of it as something serious and important, you can make it into something that can stifle you from ever making a film.

I can imagine that it must get pretty chaotic on your sets with different people making all sorts of suggestions.

A director is just somebody to say, "I know what I'm doing" and "Trust me to know what I'm doing." But the only way they'll trust you is if the product is good. If they trust you once and the film stinks, then you won't have an easy time finding a cast again.

Which directors were you most influenced by when you first became interested in films?

Living in Indiana, I was somewhat limited by what was available, but the first two films that I saw that had any lasting impact were WILD STRAWBERRIES by Bergman and LA DOLCE VITA by Fellini. Those films left me open-mouthed.

I still feel like I'm growing with Fellini's film. It was a masterpiece in that he reached all levels with that film. I love the Nino Rota score, and I was very enamored of the vingette structure, pieces that had distinct moods. It was the opposite of linear, more like big chunks of atmospheric creations that are like moving paintings.

Another thing that I found appealing was the way homosexuals were portrayed as elements of society that were accepted without fuss. That point, if nothing else, won me over to Fellini.

Bergmann, for his making dreams, memory and reality all interchangeable, appealed to me. It stuck with me as a format and style that I thought worked — the way he slid between those states so effortlessly.

Besides those two filmmakers what else were you most effected by in terms of your artistic development?

My first lover, Ted, was a great fan of James Joyce. As a result of his prodding, I also became interested in Joyce's work. I read DUBLINERS first, when I was 16, and then I read HERE COMES EVERYBODY but what really did it for me, the piece that I found the most thrilling, was ANNE OLIVIA PLURIBELLE because of the accents of the different characters. The quirky spellings really turned me on.

What about other directors? Is there anybody who has particularly impressed you?

Frank Ripploh. He's just completed his first feature called TAXI ZUM KLO ("Taxi to the Toilet"). It's a combination drama and documentary, but never is he just talking to the camera, it's always acted. He seems to be aiming for a real truth. That would put him in a real bad light with a lot of people, but the way he tells his story is so affecting that it's like getting to live the life of whatever you're not, a junkie or a black person or whatever. Frank Ripploh's film gives you a glimpse of a kind of experience that not only seems true but also enjoyable.

What do you think about Francis Ford Coppola?

I thought that APOCALYPSE NOW was a masterpiece. Although I think that the movie is quite flawed, he shared a vision with me that I would never have come close to imagining. During those years of the Vietnam war, I was so upset by what was going on that, rather than get depressed by news and TV accounts of thousands more dead and wounded, I wanted to make art that was a counterpoint to the horror. Art that would show you some beauty and fun and pleasure and sex and wild times to counteract the shit that was going on in the world. I felt that was my mission to sort of entertain the troops.

Curt McDowell's own domestic USO show?

(Laughter) Right! Which was frowned on by a lot of political activists as a chickenshit stand to take but I've got my own politics, my sexual politics that I feel like I'm on a bandstand with, and feel that that's quite enough.

A central question in your work—or is it an obsession—seems to be "Why did I turn out gay?" Do you feel that you've been able to answer that question for yourself satisfactorily?

I feel I have as well as that question can be answered. But then again I don't like to consider myself gay. It's too limiting to think that my involvements are limited to members of my own sex. There are a lot of aspects to the gay lifestyle that I don't find myself in agreement with — the ghettoization of the gays, the hostility towards members of the opposite sex.

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When I first came out here to the city I felt some sense of belonging with the gay population but after a while I found myself identifying less with it. When I found that women were actually excluded from activities, that women were thought of as frightening and fish, it was like a deliberate attempt to make people react negatively towards the opposite sex and I just rejected that altogether.

I've had numerous affairs with women that are just as important to me as any of my love affairs with men. More important in some cases.

Is guilt a real turn-on for you?

Definitely! All my fantasies revolve around doing something that I'm not supposed to be doing. My favorite fantasy is to have sex with a man through a hole in his pants in a crowded place where nobody is aware of what we're doing.

Some of the lighting effects you achieve in your films are quite stunning. Is that one of the most important considerations for you when you're getting ready to shoot a scene?

Yes. I like to shoot in natural light mostly. I also like diffused natural light, real overcast days because I don't like harsh shadows on facial features that much. I like to be able to read the facial expressions on characters' faces. For studio-type lighting I always try to have dramatic effect. I got all that from George Kuchar, who taught me the cheaper ways to go about achieving the kind of effects that Von Sternberg poineered. Backlight too; I love backlight as long as it doesn't make it totally silhouette.

I read recently that you said you wanted to educate the American public to appreciate short films. How much longer can you afford to carry on this crusade?

I don't know but I do believe people do like short films. It's crucial that it be presented correctly. Take the plays being presented at the One Act Theatre. They're having great success with the format. The audience is just educated about the rewards of seeing three different acts, three different ideas without even a thematic connection. Three experiences in one night instead of one.

People have been conditioned by television to the point that they can get a whole idea in 30 seconds. So why should everything be 90 minutes, color and 70mm?

You're already stuck with that rectangle — a sideways rectangle to boot, not even good for portraiture. Then it's ridiculous to have people tell you that it's got to be in a category, a comedy or mystery or whatever. I want to be free to use the medium to do whatever I want and take as long as I need to do it.

Somehow the public has to know that there are rewards in these more experimental veins. Most of the experimentation that we've seen in so-called underground films has been limited, only experimenting with one aspect of film per film. In one film you see how someone deals with abstract color and in another you see someone documenting what happened at Peoples Park.

With the exorbitant cost of developing, editing, lab costs, etc. have you begun to look towards video as an alternative?

Definitely. I can't wait until they've perfected the resolution of the film stock so that it looks as good as film, which was always a drawback before. I'm planning on making a video musical either this week or next on a friend's video. Working with video is so fast! You don't have to go through bins full of film all hanging on little pegs that get lost and confused and scratched and all that stuff. For you it would be akin to using a word processor as opposed to writing in longhand.

If I could get over the fact that people don't pay any attention on the TV set, I would make that my medium. I can't get used to people talking and eating and walking around when my work is on. I would like my video films to be displayed in a public place because I like gatherings of people enjoying one experience, and I'd rather that they were shown on large screens.

From the filmography that I saw in the British Film Archive, you have something like ten films that have yet to be released. Which one will you be releasing next and does the backlog hinder your creative process?

KING STREET seems really appealing right now. I think I'm real hot to do KING STREET. But as far as the backlog interfering with my current work, no it's not really a problem because I continue to film and will sometimes add appropriate recent footage to my old films, the ones that haven't yet been released.

As far as my direction I imagine I'll just keep exploring new directions. I feel like I've already put myself out on a limb and there'e no way to retract it, I can't go back to the simple life unless I lie. So I have this sort of attitude of having nothing to lose.

I'm a voyeur who can't stand to be without his fix. I love to be able to make my dreams as well as other people's come true. I intend to keep doing it; it keeps me sane.

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